

Pulsing Swarms & Squiggly Diagonals

*Pulsing Swarms & Squiggly Diagonals* by Jim Leftwich

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Printed in USA, 2006

ISBN 952-99516-1-2

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### Visual Writing

we could say visual writing is an entrance, into the between of self and other, into perception, the during of the perceived, an experience of experience at once one step removed. it is an exit, from the flat diurnal sleeping imagery of pragmatic distance, experience as a commodity, as in trance away from that and into the chaotic entropy of the real. the archetype as such is either that which is entered, or as aggregate and serial fragments a set of symbiotic clues advancing towards an exit. visual poetry is encountered in exile, as the palpable refuge and estrangement of an embryonic language, at once foreign and familiar, perhaps too close to the body and its discontinuous cognition - a flicker as if of faded cognates along a spinal axis stretched from the subjective to its objective, neither of which will cease to exist in its entirety, agitating for receptivity among the brainwave graphs.

jim leftwich 02.18.05

### TEXT

every text is at least tripartite, i.e.:

- 1) that which is written
- 2) the text itself
- 3) that which is read

these are not qualities of a single thing, but rather are distinct states or conditions of that which we call generally a text.

the transformation of that which is written to the text itself is a chaotic phase transition, as the passage from ice to water, and the transformation of the text itself to that which is read is yet another phase transition, as the passage from water to steam.

each textual state contains traces of and potentialities for the others.

some of that which is written can be found in the text itself, though the text itself exists only to write and rewrite itself.

the text itself writes as an erasure of that which is written, and it rewrites as a mask of excess against that which is read.

that which is written is entirely the responsibility of its author, every apostrophe and printer's dash, but it is barely a palimpsest of the text itself.

that which is read is constructed collaboratively by its reader, but it is damped by auctorial intention and driven by the excessively generative polysemy of the text itself.

01.30.05

improvisational enallage

improvisation is a form of trial and error. the more frequent the trials, the less frequent the errors. or so it seems. but it may be something else entirely. errors may be errors of perception, of scale and context, rather than occurrences of something "wrong". jazz players as different as art tatum and eric dolphy have both said all the notes always fit, it's just a matter of learning how to make this happen. likely a matter of listening as much as of playing, or of doing the two together. randomness might work much as does improvisation, though damped and driven by constraints and forces other than those inherent in improvisation. chaos is a system of constraints on a scale either much smaller or much larger than the system engaged under normal conditions by the human sensorium. at the limits of psychic integrity improvisation embodies an anarchy which resonates with systems and scales of an order other than its own. writing sentences as poems, remnants and resonances and palimpsests of sentences, improvising to the sense in sounds, tracking letterstrings to clusters, nodes or moments of sounded sense, i encounter again and again instances of improvisational enallage.

december 2002

ex nihilo ad absurdam

ts'ao-shu - "draft script", or "grass script"

k'uang ts'ao-shu - "crazy grass script"

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Robert Duncan - "The freedom of the individual lies in his institution of anarchy where before he was sole ruler."

Sandra Jeppesen - "Anarchy is about cultural production."

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there are no masters of prepared pen calligraphy. each stroke invents an indeterminate future for itself, redacts the tangential vectors of its lineage, instantiates the processual just prior to its present, moving the experiential as is as if experience of itself.

posit and deposit, ink doubling against offhand occlusion, wrapt mirrors reverse prestidigitation, to prophesy the faceted contexts of a revisionist ahistory. recursive loops inscribed evolve a past of fractal basins.

start with a sharpie. steal it from the imagined museum of a nameless workers' collective, it will have been the improvisational compass for their dérive. continue with a knife: archaic emblem of between, glyph for the phase transitions in a dialectical carnival of subversions.

it is the hand and the breath, the chair and the desk, the time of day and a matter of scale. if the heart was the size of a moon it would see the earth's rotation and hear its orbital song, this leaks into the hand and oils the slippage, wrapped recursive mirrors, the pen praying among themselves in pagan glossolalia. subatomic orbits inside each synapse infect our thoughts with timeless void, invisible rainbows drip like angels from a bestial tongue.

carving the pen: too much attention contaminates the surface with a discontinuous logic, the logarithmic reproduction of imitative failures. attend to the inscrutability of the pen's facticity. allow the blade to whisper along each edge, sensuous and sinuous. forget the ancient stories, and remember not to replace them. the serpent never sleeps. at the center of the sign is its absence, signifying against the science of silence.

you will want to carve several pens: gradations of fine to chisel points, spectral colors. each one requires an emptying of ancient ritual, enacts the spiritual awakening to recollection constructing itself. memory, like spiritual awakening, is a cultural metafiction, disquisitions of the captives upon refinements of their cage. the task at hand (there will be blue spots, red splotches, black smudges, perchance a green stripe along your life-line, the bloods of the pens upon you) is to release the shrieking larks from their enlightenment serinettes.

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misdirections through lineage & context

John Cage - "I decided that what was wrong was not me but the piano. I decided to change it."

Jean Dubuffet - "I have the impression, language is a rough, very rough stenography, a system of algebraic signs very rudimentary, which impairs thought instead of helping it." - "Written language seems to me a bad instrument. As an instrument of expression, it seems to deliver only a dead remnant of thought, more or less as clinkers from the fire. As an instrument of elaboration, it seems to overload thought and falsify it."

Jean Dubuffet - "I declare that every phase of the natural world (and the intellectual world is of course included), every part of every fact - mountains or faces, movements of water or forms of beings - are links in the same chain, and all proceed from the same key, and for this reason I declare that the forms of screaming birds which appear on my ink-spotted page have the same source as real birds, just as the gestures I reveal in those same spotted pages, the glance which shines from one place, the laughing face which appears in another, are the result of mechanisms which produce these same gestures, glances, laughs, elsewhere, and are almost real gestures, real glances, are in any case their cousins, or, if homologues are preferred - abortions, unsuccessful aspirations."

Henri Michaux - "Whoever, having perused my signs, is led by my example to create signs himself according to his being and his needs will, unless I am very much mistaken, discover a source of exhilaration, a release such as he has never known, a disencrustation, a new life open to him, a writing unhopecd for, affording relief, in which he will be able at last to express himself far from words, words, the words of others."

Richmond Browne's letter to Jerry Coker, in Improvising Jazz:  
"I believe that it should be a basic principle to use repetition, rather than variety - but not too much. The listener is constantly making predictions; actual infinitesimal predictions as to whether the next event will be a repetition of something, or something different. The player is constantly either confirming or denying these predictions in the listener's mind. As nearly as I can tell, the listener must come out right about 50% of the time - if he is too successful in predicting, he will be bored; if he is too unsuccessful, he will give up and call the music 'disorganized'.

Thus if the player starts a repetitive pattern, the listener's attention drops away as soon as he has successfully predicted that it is going to continue. Then, if the thing keeps going, the attention curve comes back up, and the listener becomes interested in just how long the pattern is going to continue. Similarly, if the player never repeats anything, no matter how tremendous an imagination he has, the listener will decide that the game is not worth playing, that he is not going to be able to make any predictions right, and also stops listening. Too much difference is sameness: boring. Too much sameness is boring - but also different once in a while."

Jean Dubuffet- "From the very outset, the very question of madness must be rethought since, all things considered, it has hardly any criteria other than the social." - "The notion of psychotic art is absolutely false! Psychiatrists emphasize it because they wish to believe they are in a position to differentiate, to tell who is sane and who isn't." - "I believe that the creation of art is intimately linked to the spirit of revolt. Insanity represents a refusal to adopt a view of reality that is imposed by custom. Art consists in constructing or inventing a mirror in which all of the universe is reflected. An artist is a man who creates a parallel universe, who doesn't want an imposed universe inflicted on him. He wants to do it himself. This is a definition of insanity. The insane are people who push creativity further than professional artists, who believe in it totally."

Jean Dubuffet - "We can only rid ourselves of the Western bourgeois caste by unmasking and demystifying its phony culture. It serves everywhere as this caste's weapon and the Trojan horse."

Sandra Jeppesen - "Anarchy is a struggle for the present moment."

Stephen Drury - "The first task in writing for the prepared piano is the selection and placement of the preparations, building a palette of pings, thumps, and drum and gong-like noises, with hints of microtones lying between the cracks of the keyboard, often a single sustained pitch ringing on after an initial burst of noise. The creation of a piece thus begins with a choice of materials rather than a theme or

motif (or even a twelve-tone row). Each prepared note takes on an autonomous character, like a chord or harmony complete in itself. Composition then becomes the act of ordering and combining these previously chosen sound-objects, rather than creating melodies and harmonies out of the available pitches."

Tim Gaze - "Asemic works play with our minds, enticing us to attempt to (as a text) and 'looking' (as a picture). This is a very interesting state. They form a bridge between art and writing. In Chinese culture, poetry, painting and calligraphy are deemed to be closely related arts. Here is a Western analogue."

11.29.04

a few thoughts emerging from the unarticulated text

visual writing deconstructs the conventional dichotomy of looking and reading. in attending to visual writing we are compelled to read non-textual components of the composition as semiotic agencies within the field of the writing

visual writing is gaining more practitioners, which means it is expanding in complexity in proportion to the infusion of diverse subjectivities involved in its production.

collage is a component of visual writing, or at times a tool utilized in its production.

all visual writing is a rejection of, by which i mean an expansion of, regular writing.

a single written word has at least three distinct qualities, those of visuality, sound, and sense. in regular writing, as for example an article in a newspaper, these qualities are prioritized as follows: 1) sense, 2) sound, 3) visuality. visual writing rearranges these priorities. in many cases the new priorities are 1) visuality, 2) sense, 3) sound. but, much visual writing is also a form of sound poetry, and the priorities of regular writing are reversed, i.e.: 1) visuality, 2) sound, 3) sense.

meaning is not so much presented as is a series, or an aggregate, of opportunities for the collaborative construction of meanings by the interaction of the reader and the text.

visual writing is about reading, which is to say it's about thinking. it's about changing the way one perceives and thinks about one's perceptions, which is to say it's about changing the way one reads.

visual writing is not new, but it's still new enough to be marginal, which is to say we are not yet fully comfortable as a culture with reading aggregates, or with reading squiggly diagonals, or with reading invisible resonances scattered within a field.

meanings produced by pulsing swarms, or by improvised punctuations along irregular reading routes, are often new enough, or marginal enough, or strange enough to seem to some as though they don't belong in the conventional category of meaning. and perhaps they don't. new ways of reading, in the company of new ways of writing, will produce new categories of meaning.

as more visual writing is produced, and more of it is read, the strategies for reading it will gradually catch up with the strategies involved in writing it, and an exponential expansion of the meanings produced will inevitably occur.

we aren't there yet, but we're working on it.

02.14.05

## SCRAPE

i'm not interested in the cut or the fissure so much as i am interested in the scrape, when and where two things are forced together even though they obviously do not fit, like two pieces of rusted metal sliding against each other, the sound a palpable fact of spatial dissonance, experiential epistemology like a dark splatter of ink against the light framed void moment, no past no future and no extrapolated present, just the rorshach of unhinged signifiers displaced in their cultural space/time, where reading one's world becomes a hermeneutics of the several small quakes rippling along one's spine, a sensorium scraping against a world like tectonic plates shifting their weights, reading wearing against its world like an entrance into the necessary dissonance of the real.

poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world - so thoroughly unacknowledged as to render the rest of the phrase laughable. or to render it intelligible only to a kind of bitter, mocking defiance, as when oppen rewrote it: poets are the legislators of the unacknowledged world.

oppen quit writing poems for 25 years, as if in obedience to an either/or injunction. he was caustically explicit: i don't mean that poetry will serve as politics: i know it will not. and, later: the 25 year gap: there are times when poetry, my poetry, the poetry i can write seems hopelessly inadequate.

we may be confronting a similar predicament today. our poetry is not only inadequate, it may very well be entirely irrelevant. we have to want more than that for our work. oppen again: if you decide to do something politically, you do something that has political efficacy. and if you decide to write poetry, then you write poetry, not something that you hope, or deceive yourself into believing, can save people who are suffering. that was the dilemma of the thirties. in a way i gave up poetry because of the pressures of what for the moment i'll call conscience.

i don't think we can accept that. if comedians and rock stars can continue to work in their fields and in doing so achieve something in the way of political efficacy, then surely poets can construct for themselves a comparably successful strategy. we need to begin with a both/and proposition, one which will permit us both poetry and political efficacy. i refuse to acquiesce to the idea that pressures of conscience dictate otherwise.

poets are not by definition excluded from participation in the resistance. if there is to be an avant garde - and i am very suspicious of the term - then our current circumstances demand that it be oppositional. that in itself will require that it be vigorously anti-elitist (which, in itself, may well exclude it from the historical lineage of avant gardes).

there is at present a global network, one with many nodes and with no discernible center, which is organized in active resistance to the dominance of corporatist empire. it is very easy to imagine groups of radicalized poets participating as nodes within this network - and participating within it as poets, not as anything else. this is an immediately available alternative to the either/or impasse confronted by oppen. the way to set this in motion is simply to develop strategies of distribution for the poetry which actively engage the nodes within the already established network. the quickest entry into this distribution network is through the mail art / visual poetry network.

12.27.04